



April 6, 2009

Police urge those avoiding the law to give up safely

Program clears non-violent fugitives' names

By SEAN O'SULLIVAN
The News Journal

More than 120,000 people are on the run from the law right now in Delaware.

While a few are wanted for felonies, most are wanted for misdemeanors or other minor infractions such as failing to pay a traffic ticket, missing a court date or skipping out on a child-support payment.

Community leaders and law enforcement officials hope they can clear out that backlog of outstanding warrants -- and help people get their lives back on track -- at the end of the month with a "safe surrender" program at the New Destiny Fellowship Church, 906 E. 16th St. in Wilmington from April 29 to May 2.

If the crime is non-violent and the person has no history of violence and accepts responsibility, organizers say, they can turn themselves in and likely go home the same day with a clean slate.

"This is not an amnesty program," said organizer David W. Thomas, U.S. Marshal for Delaware. But it is a chance to get "the best deal possible" by showing the courts and law enforcement that you are ready to take responsibility, he said.

Advertisements for the program, which will soon appear on billboards and DART buses around Wilmington, call it, "Your first step toward a second chance."

The idea behind it is simple -- many people may have avoided resolving their cases because they fear police or the courts.

So, for four days, the court system will move to neutral ground -- a church -- to put people at ease about the process and allow them to clear their record.

Bishop Thomas Wesley Weeks Sr., pastor of the host church, New Destiny, said ministers from all around the area are "putting themselves on the line" to support the effort and will be on hand at New Destiny to show their cooperation and provide assistance throughout the four days.

"They will be able to make sure you are appropriately handled so that when you turn yourself in, you will get all due mercy extended," Weeks said.

Some people just don't trust police or the courts, said the Rev. H. Ward Greer of Ezion Mount Carmel United Methodist Church, and organizing this in a church makes all the difference. At a police station or courthouse, Greer said, "there is a sense they have no control."

"The church is a safe place," he said.

People who are wanted on outstanding warrants, no matter how small the offense, sometimes do foolish and potentially tragic things to avoid capture, Thomas said.

And many who have warrants against them end up living outside the law, afraid or unable to get a legitimate job for fear of being caught.

This program not only helps fugitives clear their name but also helps law enforcement by reducing the

risk to police executing warrants or to officers who unexpectedly encounter someone wanted on a warrant.

"Anyone out there with an arrest warrant against them has the potential for an unpleasant encounter with law enforcement," said Deputy Attorney General Richard Andrews, and this program will allow them to avoid that.

The Delaware Public Defender's Office also is strongly supporting the effort, mailing out some 2,000 letters to past clients, informing them of the program.

The Fugitive Safe Surrender program started in 2005 after an officer was killed in Cleveland, Ohio, by a man who was wanted on an outstanding misdemeanor warrant.

Since then, the U.S. Marshals Service has organized 11 other "safe surrender" events in cities across the country, including Washington, Detroit, Philadelphia and Camden, N.J.

And the response has been overwhelming, according to Thomas, with more than 17,000 turning themselves in.

Only about 3 percent ended up going to jail, he said. The rest were able to leave with a clean record.

In those cities, Greer and Thomas said, people have walked for miles, past police stations and courthouses, to turn themselves in at a church.

And afterward, Greer said, they have been able to go out "and vote and work and live a normal life. I want to be supportive of that."

While the event sounds simple -- opening the doors of the church to allow fugitives to turn themselves in -- it will be a massive logistical undertaking.

To allow cases to be resolved right there, judges from all four of the state's court systems that handle criminal matters -- from Justice of the Peace to Superior Court -- will be on hand, along with state prosecutors, public defenders, police and probation officers.

Computer networks also will be set up to allow the immediate processing and resolution of the outstanding warrants.

The judges are expected to be set up in the sanctuary at New Destiny, a converted warehouse, which has room for about 1,000 to gather and worship on Sundays.

Weeks said there is some poetic logic in this.

Some will be able to clean up legally in the exact spot where they got cleaned up spiritually.

Weeks said he has been telling parishioners who may have outstanding warrants to participate and stop living a lie.

"The only way you are going to prosper is to live a life of no more lies. Anytime you are covering over something, you are living a lie," he said. "So set yourself free. Get things straight so you don't have to look over your shoulder, wondering if someone will catch up to you. Clear that out."

Thomas expects anywhere from several hundred to several thousand to show up, and people turning themselves in for everything "from escape to traffic offenses."

Additional Facts

SAFE SURRENDER

Wanted by the law? Fugitive Safe Surrender, April 29 to May 2, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., at New Destiny Fellowship, 16th and Thatcher streets, Wilmington. For more information, call (866) 751-5327. The program is funded through the Delaware Criminal Justice Council and by the U.S. Department of

